

(Washington, D.C.) - Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez (TX-23) has incorporated two key veterans' initiatives into this week's package approved by the U.S. House of Representatives. Rodriguez' language specifically expands mental health care services to Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans and expands outreach to those reluctant to seek help by developing a peer-to-peer counseling program.

According to the GAO, mental disorders have been reported in more than 26% of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, and it is well known that symptoms can be delayed for months or years after coming home.

"As a social worker, I saw first hand the profound effects of untreated post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the lives of individuals, families and communities," said Congressman Rodriguez. "Hundreds of thousands of returning soldiers will come home from Iraq and Afghanistan in the next few years and a high percentage will suffer from trauma. There can be serious consequences if these symptoms are ignored or missed - suicide, substance abuse, violent crime - and we, as a nation, have a moral obligation to care for our veterans. Veterans returning from combat often find they are unable to relate to family and friends and instead turn to fellow veterans as a way of coping. H.R. 2874 incorporates legislation that I sponsored earlier this year that gives veterans the chance to recover and lead healthy, productive lives through expanded access to quality mental health care as well as expanded outreach by developing a national veterans' peer-to-peer counseling program, bridging the gap for those who have trouble reaching out for help on their own."

H.R. 2874, the Veterans Health Care Improvement Act of 2007, incorporated language from HR 2689 a bill Congressman Rodriguez introduced earlier this year to expand Veterans' Administration (VA) mental health services by authorizing qualified community mental health centers to provide service to returning soldiers and which implemented a national program at the VA to train veterans in peer-to-peer counseling, outreach, and support services.

Overall, four bills were passed that included a number of provisions for veterans, including improving health care access and benefits for veterans, and providing Merchant Mariners their due compensation for their service in World War II. The bills must still be passed by the Senate,

Summary of veterans' bills passed:

- **H.R. 2874 - The Veterans Health Care Improvement Act of 2007:** This bill addresses the needs of veterans currently readjusting from combat duties by allowing veterans to access successful readjustment programs offered in their communities. H.R. 2874 addresses the needs of low income veterans and their families by providing financial assistance for those residing in permanent housing and support services as they transition from homeless to housing. The bill addresses the needs of veterans living in rural areas by providing program grants for transportation to department medical facilities and by providing necessary training for peer outreach services for returning service members;
- **H.R. 1315 - The Veterans' Benefits Improvement Act of 2007:** This bill provides specially adaptive housing assistance to disabled members of the Armed Forces residing temporarily in housing owned by a family member. The bill also establishes a scholarship program for students seeking a degree or certificate in blind rehabilitation;
- **H.R. 23 - The Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007:** This bill establishes a Merchant Mariner Equity Fund in the general fund of the Treasury and directs the Secretary of the VA to compensate qualifying members of the U.S. Merchant Marine who served (including the Army Transport Service and the Naval Transport Service) during World War II;
- **H.R. 2623 - Hospice Care:** This bill would prohibit the collection of co-payments for all hospice care furnished by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Congressman Rodriguez serves on the House Veterans Affairs Committee.